

Kayak rental business owner leads way in cleanup of debris in Clinton River

BY ELISHA ANDERSON - DETROIT FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER Jun. 10, 2011



Jerry Reis gets help from Dale Goolsby, 61, of Mt. Clemens and Tom Neldrett, 43, of Rochester Hills to clear a section of the Clinton River. Three years of work have made it safer for canoes and kayaks to pass.

River equipped with chain saws, rope and a winch used to pull thousands of pounds of debris from the water. He cuts and moves trees that have fallen into the river, clears logjams and removes trash with help from friends.

The work makes trips down the river safer for his customers and often keeps Reis -- who owns Clinton River Canoe and Kayak Rentals in Lake Orion with his wife, Renee Reis -- on the water for up to 14 hours a day, four times a week.

"You couldn't just put people in a boat and let them go down as a customer with all the mess that's in the river," Renee Reis said.

After three years of work, portions of the river in Macomb County that were once just 6 inches wide are now 10 feet wide -- enough room for canoes and kayaks to get through safely, Jerry Reis said.

His efforts are among many examples across the state of how supporters of paddling sports are looking to raise awareness and use of the state's waterways. Initiatives include creating water trails in Macomb, Wayne, Oakland, St. Clair and Monroe counties, as well as in the Great Lakes, aimed at providing a quality-of-life boost for residents and a boost to economic development.

"A lot of communities have realized that their riverfronts and their water resources are valuable," said Laura Rubin, executive director at the Huron River Watershed Council. An estimated 100,000 people paddle the Huron River in southeast Michigan annually, she said. Denise Tyler, 72, of Commerce Township started kayaking about two years ago and goes out once or twice a week on Oakland County's Huron River to explore the water trails. "They're new to me. I've discovered them and enjoyed them," she said.

At Heavner Canoe & Kayak Rental in Milford, rentals have nearly doubled in the last 10 years, with 75% of that growth coming in the last five years, owner Alan Heavner said. "It's an ever-growing sport," Heavner said. "People love to get out in the water."

Local municipalities say paddle sports are an economic development tool that lead to people buying gas, eating at restaurants and buying snacks and drinks. That's the thinking in Macomb County, where the Clinton River is being cleaned and a coastal paddling map for Lake St. Clair is being developed.

"When you have a more attractive place, it keeps your young people local," Macomb County's Land and Water Resources Program Manager Gerard Santoro said. "How do you put a value on that?"

Similar initiatives are happening across the region.

Among them:

- Water trails are being expanded around Michigan's coastline. Geography professor Dave Lemberg is taking a sabbatical from Western Michigan University to work on developing a sea kayak trail on Lake Michigan.
- A trail guide should be done in September and will take paddlers along the Detroit River, River Raisin, Huron River and River Rouge in Wayne and Monroe counties, said Anita Twardesky of Riverside Kayak Connection. The paths will be available at www.downrivergreenways.org.
- St. Clair County developed the Blueways of St. Clair, which has 16 paddling routes in eight water bodies and can be found at www.bluewaysofstclair.org.

"We're really just trying to highlight those water resources and make them into destinations in and of themselves," said David Struck, interim planning director of St. Clair County Metropolitan Planning Commission. • Macomb County is creating a coastal paddling map of Lake St. Clair that will tie into other existing water trails and the Clinton River trail map. It will be available at www.tourlakestclair.com later this summer.

- In Oakland County, there are two established access points on the Shiawassee River, [11 established points and seven potential points on the Huron River](#) and [seven established access points and 10 potential points on the Clinton River](#). The potential points are being looked at for development, Oakland County Planning and Economic Development senior planner Nina Ignaczak said.

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